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"Lift Up Your Voice": Women's Voices and Feminist
Interpretation in Jewish Studies (review)

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Renée Levine Melammed (ed.)
“Lift Up Your Voice”: Women’s Voices and
Feminist Interpretation in Jewish Studies
Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonoth, 2001. 205 pp.

reviewed by Elisheva Baumgarten

This book, the product of a conference held at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem,¹ not only offers its readers the opportunity to read the papers given at an interesting and stimulating gathering, but, more importantly, constitutes a valuable contribution to the Hebrew-speaking audience’s ability to access and enjoy academic studies that focus on gender and women’s studies. One could say that over the past five years in Israel, we are witness to a phenomenon that occurred in the American academy a few years earlier. In the early 1990s, only a few English-language anthologies about gender and Jewish studies had appeared, such as *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, edited by Lynn Davidson and Shelley Tenenbaum, and Judith Baskin’s *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*.² Today, many collections and several important monographs are available. In Hebrew, until recently, the only such collection of academic studies was Yael Azmon’s *A View into the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies*.³ Because of the special merit of Levine Melammed’s book in filling this gap, my review will focus on the picture it provides as one of the first available Hebrew anthologies on the meeting of gender and women’s studies with Jewish studies.

In the context of academic Hebrew writings on women’s studies and Jewish studies, Levine Melammed’s book is unique in its wide range of subjects, including such fields as literature and pedagogy, which do not appear in Azmon’s volume. It is the first book in Hebrew to portray both current academic research and the challenges faced by those who work in the field. However, echoing the book’s membership in a genre that is well developed elsewhere, the editor feels no need to follow Azmon in introducing her book

with a long and detailed analysis of women's status in Judaism (which was then subject to much criticism). Levine Melammed assumes that her readers are well aware of the importance of her subject, and her introduction contains only an outline of the different sections, along with a comment:

In their articles, these scholars struggle with the variety of problems and issues that arise from the connection between women's studies and Jewish studies. At times, the problem has to do with the source material or with the absence of a woman's voice; in other instances the problems concern the absence of a feminist reading or of appropriate methodologies; and at times the problems are the result of lacunae in Jewish history. (p. 11)

This is borne out in the articles themselves, and especially in the personal anecdotes the authors choose to tell. One issue that is emphasized again and again is the difficulty of finding women's voices in texts and historical narratives that were written by men. As Paula Hyman recounts:

Thirty years ago, when I began my doctoral studies, all of the topics I was studying appeared to be gender neutral: The authors whose works we studied were just Jews, and their books constituted the Jewish classical texts. It took me years to realize that all these Jews were men, and all the texts were written by men. (p. 145)

Characteristically, stories about the hardships encountered in a male-dominated profession, studying women in fields in which they had not previously been sought, recur in the articles written by the twelve female authors in the anthology and do not appear in the three articles written by men. The authors also discuss the difficulties they have faced in trying to explain to the general public—both within the academy and in Jewish communal frameworks—the importance of making women a focus in Jewish studies. The transmission of such personal testimonies is a further important contribution of this book. As gender studies (so we hope) become more mainstream within Jewish studies, the need to justify and explain the importance of this subject should diminish.

The book is divided into five parts, four of which are organized chronologically. Skipping over the biblical period, which was discussed at the conference

but unfortunately is missing from the book, the first part, entitled “Rabbinic Literature,” is devoted to women’s lives during the last years of the Second Temple and in the mishnaic and talmudic periods. Its four articles, written by two historians (Tal Ilan and Chana Safrai) and two scholars of rabbinics (Shulamith Valler and Judith Hauptman), present different feminist methods of analyzing rabbinic literature and its images of women.

The second part, devoted to the Middle Ages, is less comprehensive than the first and contains just two articles—by Judith Baskin, on women in medieval Ashkenaz, and by Abraham Melammed, on images of women in medieval philosophical literature. The articles on the modern period are divided into two parts. The first, on literature by women from the Haskalah through the modern period in Israel, includes articles by two leading scholars in the field, Tova Cohen and Yaffa Berlowitz. The second, on history, contains an analysis of women in Hasidism, by David Biale; an overview of modern Jewish women’s history, by Paula Hyman; Levine Melammed’s comments on these talks; and a final discussion of women’s studies and the Holocaust by Judith Baumel. One may wonder why only this fourth section merits the title “Jewish History,” and one may dispute the decision to separate the literary and historical perspectives. However, to a large extent this approach represents the materials, both primary and secondary, that are to be found today. The heavy emphasis on the modern period prevailing both among the conference participants and in the field at large demanded the further division of the articles on this period.

The last section of the book, with contributions by Zvi Adelman, Vanessa Ochs, and Deborah Weissman, discusses pedagogy and recent attempts to integrate women’s studies into the Judaica curriculum in Israel and North America.

An important feature of the volume is that it does not seek to present a survey of Jewish history and literature. Unlike other anthologies that have sought to cover all historical periods and geographical centers, this one assumes that readers interested in a survey will turn to already available materials. The articles collected here are meant, rather, to represent the state of the art, by examining or surveying specific issues and topics. A common denominator is the authors’ methodological focus; they wish to discuss theoretical problems rather than address specific textual or cultural phenomena.

Judith Hauptman distinguishes in her article between two schools of thought characterizing those interested in learning about women in Judaism. The first seeks to apply feminist methodology to Jewish writings even if this results in the exposition of moral flaws within canonical texts. The second, which includes many observant Jews, accepts and upholds the sanctity of the texts while applying the new methodologies.

The articles in the book aptly demonstrate both tendencies. For example, Baskin's article discusses the ways in which medieval rabbis turned Jewish women into objects serving their own religious purposes. Regarding two of her three examples, namely, the interpretation of the laws of ritual purity and the images of women appearing in *Sefer hasidim*, Baskin demonstrates how men's words and thoughts molded female behavior. Only at the end of her article does Baskin suggest that women also had certain powers to change and influence society. Thus, in discussing the laws of ritual purity, Baskin's central example is the ruling of one of the Tosafists (and not the Ba'al Tosefta, as rendered erroneously by the translator) that women in the aftermath of their menstrual period, before their immersion in the ritual bath, may not bathe in warm water or wear nicer clothes. The Tosafist reasoned that such behavior would render them less likely to bathe with care at the end of their time of impurity, and their carelessness might lead their husbands to sin. Baskin sees this ruling as representative of the medieval rabbis' efforts to control female bodies and of men's constant attention to their own spirituality, and not to that of women. Their concern, according to Baskin, is not for the woman immersing herself in the *mikveh* but for her husband. Here we may discern Baskin's tendency to view the rabbis and the traditional texts as anti-women, a view not necessarily corroborated by religious texts from the period that assert the risk of punishment to both husband and wife if the immersion is not done correctly.

However, one of the most interesting points in Baskin's article is her argument for a subversive reading of medieval culture. This methodological approach is characteristic of feminist scholarship and seeks to disclose the power women can exercise even in situations in which they appear powerless. Baskin points to the ways women could control their fertility and sexual availability. Similarly, David Biale reads hasidic texts subversively. Both Baskin and Biale demonstrate how adding women as a factor in history can change the historian's picture of reality.

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Other authors in the book, such as Hauptman herself, can be counted among those who use feminist methodology while attempting to preserve the sanctity of the texts. Hauptman aims to reveal new information about women that has not yet been analyzed by previous scholars. In some ways, her purpose stands in contrast to Baskin's objectives, since she is not interested in exposing women's oppression or the manipulation of women in the patriarchal societies of the past. Rather, she wishes to discuss the give and take that existed in the traditional texts between those who were more and those who were less pro-women.

These different methodological emphases have been constant in the discipline of women's studies since its inception. Without a doubt, the scholar's own identity influences the course he or she chooses and the questions posed. However, these different emphases raise questions about the scholar's purposes. Hauptman, one of the few authors to devote part of her discussion to methodology itself, prefers that authors use a variety of feminist methods rather than taking one of them as paramount. Indeed, this book provides examples of a number of available methodologies.

Levine Melammed does not define the intent of the collection in her introduction. She assumes this purpose to be obvious and briefly points to a number of problems related to women's studies and Jewish studies, without discussing them. The division of the book according to historical periods also does little to elaborate on these issues. Though one can regret this lack of clarity, one of the appealing features of the book is the variety it presents.

However, seeking to characterize the articles as a group, one may say that almost all of them represent what may be considered a first step towards a broader women's history. Most of them fit into the category of her-story or additive history, pointing to women's presence and actions without changing the accepted narrative substantially. Thus, the two articles that discuss Hebrew literature demonstrate that there were women who wrote during the Enlightenment and during the period of the Yishuv, but they do not manage to show how women's presence changes the accepted canon. From this point of view, many of the articles belong to the genre of "becoming visible" that was so popular in European history in the seventies and the eighties of the twentieth century.

The authors ask questions about the identity of scholars, their hypotheses, and the milieu in which their research takes place. For example, Shulamith Valler, in an article entitled "Why Do Women Avoid Studying Rabbinic/

Halakhic Literature?” explains the importance of the identity of scholars and argues that research on women should be conducted by women. Turning to the scholars’ religious identity, she points out that most rabbinic students and so most scholars of the Talmud are male and Orthodox. Her hope is to see more (non-orthodox) women studying the Talmud and introducing new, non-traditional perspectives to scholarship. In this way, she hopes, gender divisions in ancient society will be unraveled to present a new picture of the past. Relating to the cultural differences between American and Israeli academia, she emphasizes her preference for the American reality.

In my eyes, the most problematic aspect of the articles in this volume is the difficulty of using them to move from additive history to the writing of a new historical narrative that is transformational. Perhaps this is because most of the articles belong to the discipline of women’s history rather than to that of gender studies. Here one can see a difference between the scholars from the U.S., whose articles are more oriented toward studying gender, focusing on the differences between men and women, and those from Israel, who concentrate on women’s stories. For example, in Tal Ilan’s article one can see the author almost but not quite move from the study of women to the study of gender. Ilan discusses the famous *mishnah* in which the permissibility of Torah study for women is discussed (*Sotah* 3:4). She suggests that R. Joshua, who advocated allowing women to study Torah, did so because he was afraid that if they were not allowed access to the Jewish canon, they would leave the fold and join one of the many sects that existed in his period. However, Ilan does not take this argument one step further and explain how a parallel process did or did not take place among men and how women fit into the society as a whole.

The American scholars, by contrast, discuss both women and men. In some cases, such as Baskin’s study of medieval Ashkenaz, the author focuses on the male gaze and in effect discusses only women and the conception of woman in society. David Biale’s article, on the other hand, describes problems with which both men and women had to contend in light of the growing popularity of the hasidic movement, pointing to a new gendered analysis of Hasidism.

I was particularly attracted to the way in which Vanessa Ochs chose to discuss the dilemmas that women’s studies scholars have been dealing with over the past few years. Ochs’s article on the pedagogy of Jewish studies and women’s studies points to a need, on the one hand, for a new curriculum

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in light of current research and changing emphases, and, on the other, for changes in the way Judaism is presented in general courses. She recounts the difficulties some of her students have when her discussions of gender and Judaism leave them feeling that they are not learning about “authentic” Judaism.

Ochs points to the tension between the need to write a new, inclusive history and the skewed picture such attempts often end up producing. She cites the following written summary of a session at a conference that sought the inclusion of women in discussions of the history of religion:

The future of women’s voices in Jewish-Christian relations: Women’s voices have enriched religious experience for hundreds of years and especially in modern times. . . . Can women from different social and religious backgrounds meet and find common ground just because they are women? (p. 176)

Ochs suggests that we substitute the word “men” in every place where women are mentioned in this short description to see what the consequences of such inquiries may be. On the one hand, the new awareness of women and of gender studies has given us a whole new set of questions; on the other, there is the danger of creating an isolated women’s studies in which women’s religious experience, like vitamins added to milk, only enriches an already assumed or given picture.

Ochs and other participants in Levine Melammed’s volume raise some of the burning issues in Jewish gender studies today. Scholars have to progress simultaneously in a variety of directions in order to provide new information about women in the past while attempting to write a new transformative history. This book provides an up-to-date blueprint, in Hebrew, of this growing and exciting field and as such is a valuable resource to all scholars of gender studies and especially to the Israeli academic community.

Notes

1. The conference, entitled “The Impact of Women’s and Gender Studies on Jewish Studies” was organized by Renée Levine Melammed, editor of the present volume. It was reviewed by Deborah Greniman in *Tikkun*, 14/5 (September–October 1999); reprinted in *Nashim*, no. 3 (2000), pp. 263–266.

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2. See Lynn Davidman and Shelley Tennenbaum (eds.), *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Judith R. Baskin (ed.), *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).
3. Yael Azmon (ed.), *Eshnav lehayehen shel nashim behevrot Yehudiyot: Kovetz mehkirim* (A view into the lives of women in Jewish societies: Collected essays; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1995).